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LOCAL

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Baldwin gets cash for district

By David Enrich
States News Service

Kohl hails her efforts for her constituents

WASHINGTON — The Dodgeville hospital needed a dialysis machine. Eight of its patients, suffering from end-stage renal disease, had to drive to Madison three times each week to have their blood purified. If the hospital had its own dialysis unit, the patients wouldn't have to make the 40-mile trek.

Last spring, Nancy Caldwell, a nurse, presented the hospi-

tal's case to U.S. Rep. Tammy Baldwin, D-Madison. As the congresswoman listened to Caldwell describe the situation, she jotted herself a note: "We've got to do something about this."

Upon returning to Washington, Baldwin's staff prepared a report detailing the importance and the cost of the dialysis unit. Baldwin presented it to

her Wisconsin colleague, Rep. David Obey, the top-ranking Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee. Obey inserted a \$170,000 "earmark" for the dialysis unit into a spending bill, which Congress passed last week.

Baldwin has been "very aggressive" in funneling as much government money as possible into the district, said Sen. Herb

Kohl, D-Wis.

Baldwin employs a pair of staffers to keep track of chances for local governments and organizations to receive federal funding via the budget or grants. And on trips back to the district, Baldwin said, "we try to have our ear to the ground for opportunities."

This year, Baldwin has netted close to \$13 million in

federal funding for a wide range of public and private projects in the 2nd Congressional District.

"It is a wonderful Christmas present for the dialysis patients," Caldwell said of the money for the dialysis equipment.

But should lawmakers be in the business of playing Santa?

Citizens Against Government Waste, a nonpartisan organization based in Washington,

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Baldwin

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thinks the answer is no.

Sean Rushton, a spokesman for the watchdog group, said Congress this year has allocated about \$20 billion — less than one percent of the overall federal budget — for “pork,” defined as any item inserted into a spending bill for the primary benefit of local or special interests.

“We decided a long time ago there was going to be a federal role in helping communities,” Obey said. “The fact is, as long as there’s a federal role, a member of Congress has an obligation to work for their district.”

As it is, Wisconsin gets a relatively small slice of federal “pork”: less than \$11 per resident, far below the national average of about \$26 per person, according to Citizens Against Government Waste. Baldwin and Obey both cited that disparity as one justification for pursuing funding opportunities.

“This money has already been authorized and exists for these purposes,” Baldwin argued. “It’s not the infusion of dollars into these appropriations bills that would not already have been spent.”

Relying on earmarks, however, is not necessarily a good way to compensate for Wisconsin’s lack of federal funding.

“We can do better to the extent that more money is based on competitive grants rather than earmarks,” said Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis. “The more decisions that are based on (grants), the better we do. The more it’s based on whether one congressman’s been there for 50 years, the worse we do.”

Baldwin secured varying amounts of cash for 11 projects in the district. For each, she says she can point to both a pressing need for funding and a reason why the federal government should provide the funds.

In addition to the dialysis equipment in Dodgeville,

nearly \$10 million of Baldwin’s earmarks promote projects ranging from barley and oat research to land acquisitions for the Fairfield Marsh and the Ice Age Trail to rehabilitating the Portage Canal and State Street in Madison.

About \$2.7 million went to installing laptop computers in police cruisers, providing low-cost housing in Madison, introducing closed-captioning courses at the Madison Area Technical College and training disabled individuals for information technology careers.

Local officials say that federal funds, however small, can make a big difference. The \$200,000 Congress approved for Madison’s housing program “will go a long way,” said Mayor Sue Bauman. The city, she said, will use the funds to attract more financing from private investors and community groups.

The Agricultural Research Service, stationed at UW-Madison, is getting \$3 million for a new laboratory. “This will enable us to expand our research on improving barley and oats for consumers in Wisconsin and nationwide,” said researcher David Peterson.

While the hospital in Dodgeville must still come up with money to pay for construction and other related expenses, Caldwell is thankful for the help the dialysis funding will provide.

“It’s not a park. It’s not a monument,” Caldwell said of the dialysis machine. “It’s something that really affects patients and their families out here in a rural community.”